

“A Matter of Choice”
The Northern Plains Looks at Aging
“Independent Aging Agenda Event” Post-Event Summary
A Town Hall Meeting at the Historic Fargo Theatre
Fargo, ND
Wednesday July 20th, 2005

Moderators: Yvonne Condell, Professor Emeritus, Regional AARP Volunteer Director for the Midwest and Former North Dakota Governor Edward T. Schafer (1993-2000)

Number of Persons Attending: 172

Town Hall Participants Age Range: 17 to 93 with the average being 58.56 yrs.

Background of Participants: Retirees; students; general public; professionals in the areas of business, city/county/state government, arts & culture, health care, long-term care, parish nursing, volunteer and tribal agencies.

Media Coverage of Event: Articles in the Forum on July 20 and 21, 2005. Television coverage of the event by ABC Channel 6 (WDAY) and NBC Channel 11 (KVLV).

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Post Event Summary Report*

What three to five issues do you believe are the most important issues facing people over age 60 in the Northern Plains today?

I. The most frequent concerns mentioned were in relation to health care issues. In order of frequency cited they were:

1. The high cost of health care (including long-term care) and prescription drugs.
2. Lack of adequate health care services in the more rural/frontier areas.
3. The need for improvement in over-all health (healthy lifestyles, improved nutrition, physical fitness and public education in these areas).
4. The need for mental health services (including alleviation of loneliness).
5. Management of chronic diseases and dementias.
6. Concern regarding the national shortage of trained nurses.
7. The gap in health care coverage for those between 55 and 65 (particularly for those who have been forced into retirement).

II. Another area generating significant concerns was income and employment. In order of frequency cited they were:

1. Concerns about inadequate income in retirement (including respondents living on Social Security, a fixed income, and those re-entering the workforce at minimum wage after retirement).
2. Concerns about the future of Social Security.
3. Lack of living wage jobs for those who want to or need to continue to work.
4. Obtaining purposeful part-time work after retirement.
5. Forced retirement at a specific age in some occupations/companies.

6. Concerns about financial counseling that is tied to the sale of financial products.
7. Age discrimination in employment.
8. Dissolved retirement funds.
9. Concern the “volunteering is a luxury” baby boomers will not be able to engage in because of the need to work for a wage.

III. A broad array of concerns relative to long-term care was cited. In order of frequency cited they were:

1. The need to support for informal care giving.
2. The shrinking workforce to support federal programs that serve the elderly.
3. The lack of informal caregivers.
4. The need for in-home services (medical and non-medical).
5. Fairly paid long-term care employees of sufficient quality.
6. A continuum of care from in-home to skilled nursing care.
7. Concern about being “stuck” in a nursing home.
8. Hospice and end-of-life care.

IV. The following housing related concerns were mentioned. In order of frequency cited they were:

1. Affordable/safe housing.
2. Concern about high real estate/school taxes and the impact that has on housing affordability.

V. The next areas of concern were in relation to “finding meaning” in retirement. In order of frequency cited they were:

1. Finding meaning and making a contribution in the retirement years.
2. Engaging in worthwhile activities/pursuits.
3. Meaningful social engagement with others (from those who may be homebound to those who are active and mobile).
4. Making a successful transition from employment to retirement.
5. “Community connectedness” and feeling respected/valued.

VI. Transportation issues cited in order of frequency were:

1. Gaining access (availability of suitable transportation and handicap accessibility) to the places people either needed to or wanted to go.
2. Concerns about transportation options in rural/frontier areas.
3. Concerns about public transportation options (routes, hours of service, frequency, appropriateness for mobility impaired) in more urban areas.

VII. Environmental issues cited in order of frequency were:

1. Concerns about the availability of good quality drinking water.
2. Concerns about clean air, specifically pollution from coal plants.

VIII. Legislative/congressional issues cited in order of frequency were:

1. Concerns about the public’s ability to effectively influence government policy.
2. The perception that politicians use confusing language to “blow off” questions about taxes and health care.

IX. Issues related to diversity cited were:

1. Learning to relate to an increasingly diverse population.

What do you think can and should be done to address each of the issues you listed about on the local, state, and national level?

I. The most frequent solutions/recommendations offered in relation to health care issues in order of frequency cited were:

1. Adoption of a federal universal single payer health care program (inclusive of long-term care costs).
2. Caps on the price of prescription drugs.
3. Caps on the price of health care services.
4. Limiting the power of pharmaceutical lobby's in Washington DC.
5. Limiting dollars for pharmaceutical "advertising" that adds to the cost of prescriptions.
6. Increase pharmaceutical competition to drive prices down.
7. Use of technology driven health care in rural/frontier areas – virtual doctors.
8. Improved education of physicians in nutrition and disease prevention.
9. Reimburse physicians for health and wellness outcomes.
10. Provide financial incentives to consumers for physical fitness/healthy lifestyles choices.
11. Require legislators/congressmen to pay for his or her own health care coverage and at the same rate as the general working public pays for it.
12. Educate the public on nutrition and healthy lifestyle choices.
 - a. How to eat a well-balanced healthy diet on a limited income.

II. The most frequent solutions/recommendations offered in relation to income and employment in order of frequency cited they were:

1. Tax relief (property taxes were the most often cited).
2. Hold down the cost medical care/prescription drugs.
3. Save Social Security
 - a. Raising the level of income taxed for Social Security.
 - b. Establish an income limit for those who receive Social Security.
4. Allow Americans to invest their money in financial vehicles that will provide for a higher income than Social Security would have provided.
5. Open the doors of employment opportunity to older people.
 - a. Provide flexible work schedules and hours to keep older people in the workforce longer.
 - b. Develop a Job Corp for older persons to help place them in full and part-time positions.
 - c. Phase older people out of employment. Do away with mandatory retirement based on age (use a skills test instead).
 - d. Provide a stipend for volunteer work to offset out of pocket costs.
6. Education on financial planning should be offered to all age groups – mandatory training offered in schools (elementary through university) and in the workplace.
7. Provision of more financial planning that is not tied to the sale of a financial product (public television?).

III. The most frequent solutions/recommendations offered in relation to long-term care in order of frequency cited they were:

1. Develop and reimburse for in-home services as an alternative to nursing home care.
2. Federally paid long-term care insurance or universal health care covering LTC.
3. Tax breaks for family caregivers.
4. Allow consumers to decide how they will spend their long-term care dollars.
5. Challenge people to take charge – incentives for purchasing long-term care insurance and practicing good health habits.
6. Less regulation of nursing homes.

IV. The most frequent solutions/recommendations offered in relation to housing in order of frequency cited they were:

1. Construction of reasonably priced senior friendly housing.
2. Property tax relief (school taxes as a portion of property tax were most often cited as being too high for older/disabled persons).
3. Develop easily accessible/affordable home repair/upkeep services for low and middle-income elders.
 - a. Develop an on-going volunteer force to do home repair and chore services.
 - Retired carpenters/electricians/plumbers/painters etc.
 - High school “shop” students.
 - “Adopt a House” to do on-going repairs for an elder/disabled person.
4. Provide flexible/affordable transportation services that allow older persons to stay in their own homes.
5. Develop “Communities of Care” like the budding project in Arthur, ND.

V. The most frequent solutions/recommendations offered in relation to “finding meaning” in retirement in order of frequency cited were:

1. Promote life long learning.
 - a. Opportunities to take classes through our universities for low or no tuition.
 - b. Provide socialization opportunities that also expand the mind and integrate learning and physical fitness.
 - c. Develop a “saging” or “wisdom” center that focuses on learning between generations and capitalizes on the wisdom of our elders.
2. Enhance volunteer services with ease of access, incentives and productive use of volunteer time and talents.
 - a. Build a volunteer Clearing House (with on-line access to meaningful volunteer opportunities) that matches skills to community needs.
 - b. Start a “Silver Service” system where elder volunteers can earn dollars for their grandchildren’s education.
 - c. Develop a national campaign on “volunteering” and how to make it meaningful and productive.
 - d. Provide training to public and private businesses on how to make the best use of volunteers.
3. Develop meaningful intergenerational programs.
 - a. Use older persons to teach school children how hobbies, meaningful volunteerism, expanded interests and a variety of life skills will impact their retirement years.
 - b. Start an intergenerational orchestra with young and old stand partners.
 - c. Have young people “Adopt a Grandparent” who lives alone in their own home.
 - Help the “adopted grandparent” with yard work, vacuuming, washing windows etc.
 - Take them to the park, a bowling alley, golf course, swimming pool and other places where the elder can have fun but also get some exercise.
 - Take them to community events (plays, music events, festivals, fishing, church, etc.).
 - Run “errands” for the “adopted grandparent.
4. Provide for on-going training to keep seniors up to date on the latest technology (phones, computers, assistive devices, audio-visual equipment, automobile features, home security devices/technology, etc.)
5. Develop new “boomer” appropriate alternatives to “senior centers.”

VI. The most frequent solutions/recommendations offered in relation to transportation issues in order of frequency cited were:

1. Improve transportation in rural areas.
 - a. Increase routes, days of service and destinations.
 - b. Use school buses to give rides to elderly when they are not in use for school events (pick up seniors to go grocery shopping, do banking, go to the post office etc in their local community/small town).
 - c. Coordinate the rural and urban transportation systems.
2. Make national and state changes that increase safety on the road: better lighting, larger signs, vehicle improvements (back-up warning systems, anti-glare windshields, more effective headlights).
3. Develop incentives for seniors to use public transportation rather than drive (provide assistance getting in and out of the bus, allow more time for older people to embark and disembark, provide “city bus” transportation to community events in the evenings, make seats and aisles more “senior friendly”).

VII. The most frequent solutions/recommendations offered in relation to environmental issues in order of frequency cited were:

1. Legislation that addresses clean air and water.

VIII. The most frequent solutions/recommendations offered in relation to legislative/congressional issues in order of frequency cited were:

1. Election of politicians who can:
 - a. Resist the power of lobbyists (pharmaceutical industry mentioned most often) and ideology.
 - b. Implement meaningful/effective health care reform.
2. Increase grassroots access to legislators/congressmen.

IX. The solution/recommendation offered in relation to issues of diversity was:

1. Strengthen the role of the state humanities councils.

* This post-event summary report was condensed from the Input Forms and Comment Cards submitted by persons attending the Town Hall Meeting. The comments have been combined, summarized and categorized according to topic and the frequency the topic was referenced. Summary items are not “word for word” statements as written by every attendee. The raw data on input sheets and comment cards are available for review.

Town Hall Meeting Committee Members:

Fargo Theatre, Fargo, ND – Margie Bailly
Innovis Health, Fargo, ND – Dr. Ted Kleiman
Land of the Dancing Sky Area Agency on Aging, Minnesota – Danica Robson and Mark Tysver
Moorhead Community Education, Moorhead, MN – Karen Nitzkowski
Riverview Place, Inc., Fargo, ND – Bonnie Peters and Michele McRae
Southeast Human Service Center, Aging Services, Southeastern ND – Sandy Arends

Town Hall Meeting Financial Sponsors:

AARP North Dakota	Giving + Learning Program, Riverview Place, Inc.
Dakota Medical Foundation	Land of the Dancing Sky Area Agency on Aging
Gate City Bank	Moorhead Community Education

This “independent aging agenda event” is designed to provide input to the Policy Committee of the 2005 White House Conference on Aging. This event is neither sponsored nor endorsed by the White House, nor does it in any way represent the policies, positions, or opinions of the 2005 White House Conference on Aging or the federal government.